

Intimate Rut

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--- Abstract ---

Intimate Rut is the culmination of a studio-based art practice, public gallery exhibition of the same name, and thesis support paper, completed while pursuing a Master's Degree in Fine Arts at York University. These works interrogate the particular intersection of identity that I inhabit – male, white, working class, Canadian. The act of painting allows me to disrupt, creating moments of tension and dissolution. These works aim to reveal what masculinity tends to hide – fragility, isolation, and embarrassment, among others, as well as the inability to manage emotions and behaviours like these. The intent of this paper is to identify the locus of contemporary masculinity, map its immediate trajectory, and unweave certain aspects of its construction; then, from there, to demonstrate how this research is applied into creating works of art, and to describe how those works relate to the subject.

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--- Introduction ---

Intimate Rut is the culmination of a studio-based art practice, public gallery exhibition¹ of the same name, and thesis support paper, completed while pursuing a Master's Degree in Fine Arts at York University. At the core, these oil paintings examine the particular intersection of identity that I inhabit – male, white, working class, Canadian. Working from photographs as reference, both staged and from a personal archive, the act of painting allows me to disrupt these images, creating moments of tension and dissolution. These works aim to reveal what traditional masculinity tends to hide – fragility, isolation, and embarrassment, among other emotions and behaviours, as well as the inability to manage emotions and behaviours like these. My thesis research is outlined in four sections. The first section draws from theoretical texts on gender and identity, particularly as they relate to contemporary masculinity and its construction. The second section locates art movements emerging after Postmodernism and the tenets that compose them, such as sincerity and a return to Romanticism. The third section identifies contemporary artists as key figures toward the development of my own of studio works, both in terms of the painterly and in the subject matter dealt with. The final section speaks specifically toward the artworks created while pursuing my degree, providing context and offering personal significance, as well as tying in the theory from the two sections prior. The intent of this paper is to identify the locus of contemporary masculinity, map its immediate trajectory, and unweave certain aspects of its

¹ *Gales Gallery*, 105 Accolade West Building, York University, Toronto, ON; April 23 – 30, 2019.

construction; then, from there, to demonstrate how this research is applied into creating works of art, and to describe how those works relate to the subject.

--- Masculinity and Dysfunction ---

The foundation of my research begins with questions surrounding how contemporary masculinity is constructed and performed (Butler 33). How have representations of masculinity in art and popular culture changed in the last few decades? What, if any, are its determining social rules? Is the path set, or is there opportunity to recompose masculinity through self-reflection? Contemporary French philosopher Rene Girard posits that one of the leading messages in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, is that "masculine relationships are based on reciprocal acts of violence (48)." This ancient depiction of masculinity, with its mythos still present through to the 1980's, is markedly different than softer representations of masculinity found in popular media emerging in the 1990's. Perhaps as a response to the impact of 2nd wave feminism², and in conjunction with a heightened awareness of identity politics, within this period there begins a clear shift away from the spectacular machismo of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone in the 1980's, to a softer representation demonstrated by actors such as Brad Pitt and Keanu Reeves in the 1990's (Walsh 6-7). In the era of mass media, pop culture icons such as these have become touchstones for a mimetic feedback loop, where individuals determine their own identities and behaviours based off these fictional personalities. This shift is notable not only in Hollywood depictions, but also in scholarly discourses on masculinity, where the gender order in itself has become issue (Walsh 4). In his book *Masculinities and Culture*, John Beynon writes of the "new man" and the "old man" as

² See: Manohla Dargis, "OSCAR FILMS/ACTORS..."

being a central idea in the construction of “millennium masculinity,” with the “old man” rooted in nostalgia for a bygone era (124-8). However, the last decade has given rise to a wave of regressive masculinity, perhaps most notable in the political sphere of the emerging alt-right, and in the stubborn popularity of individuals like Donald Trump and Jordan Peterson. Alarming, this perspective is not limited to men of a certain age or a particular status, and the same behaviours are becoming manifest in so-called ‘men’s rights groups,’ like the Proud Boys³ (Paling), or in communities found online, such as Incels⁴ (“Why Incels...”) or Redpillers⁵ (Marche). What we are experiencing now is a period of flux, containing a range of masculinities, many of which operate on the peripheral of dominant, hegemonic masculinity. Fintan Walsh argues in his book *Male Trouble*, that as the complex relationships between a range of masculinities continue to fracture, the defining feature of masculinity is its dysfunction (4).

³ A far-right, neo-fascist organization comprised of solely male members that promotes political violence; views men, particularly white men, as “under siege”.

⁴ “Involuntary celibate” – An online subculture who are defined by being unable to find romantic or sexual partners.

⁵ A community on Reddit.com – In reference to *The Matrix* (1999), an online community of men who have “taken the red pill” and come to “see reality.” Within this community, this means seeing dating as a sexual marketplace, and that feminism has given women all the power, among other sexist ideology.

--- Art World Considerations ---

When making artwork in today's competitive art world, it is important to not only make work that is important to you, but also to locate trends and movements that are emerging in the larger art world and market. To begin my research, I started with a single question: What is happening right now in today's art world? I quickly came to find that many authors were arguing that Postmodernism, as an era, starting in the 1970's, was moving quickly out of fashion, and that among them there was a sense of urgency to name the era that follows. Three texts, each with their own titular -ism, stood out: Alan Kirby's *Digimodernism*, Nicolas Bourriaud's *Altermodern*, and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's *Notes on Metamodernism*. This is not to say that there is a unified consensus flowing through these texts, or that Postmodernism has entirely left the building, so to speak. What does become abundantly clear, though, is that Postmodernism, and its associated traits of cynicism and irony, no longer appear contemporary. This section analyzes parts of these texts to identify some common threads among them.

In an excerpt from his trilogy *Spheres*, as presented in Beaux Arts Magazine, Peter Sloterdijk, contemporary German philosopher and cultural theorist, writes about the Modern period as being of superabundance; a seemingly infinite stockpile of latent energy, in the form of oil, waiting to be employed for an era of likewise infinite progress. This sentiment of forward progress came to an abrupt halt in 1973 with the first oil crisis,

an embargo set in place by members of the Organizations of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries toward nations that supported Israel during the Arab-Israeli War of the same year. The second oil crisis, in 1979, heralded by the Iranian civil war, all but solidified the notion that the superabundance and forward momentum of the Modern era had come to pass (qtd. In Bourriaud 6-7). It is no coincidence, then, that Jean-Francois Lyotard's seminal text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, was published that same year. Within this framework, Postmodernism reads as a period of mourning and depression, lamenting the loss of a clear, forward direction. Bourriaud describes Postmodernism as a period of "'afterwards'; after the myth of progress, after the revolutionary utopia, after the retreat of colonialism, after the battles for political, social and sexual emancipation" (8). Jos de Mul characterizes the Postmodern period as being ironic, sarcastic, and distrustful of grand narratives and singular truths (qtd. In Vermeulen and van den Akker 4).

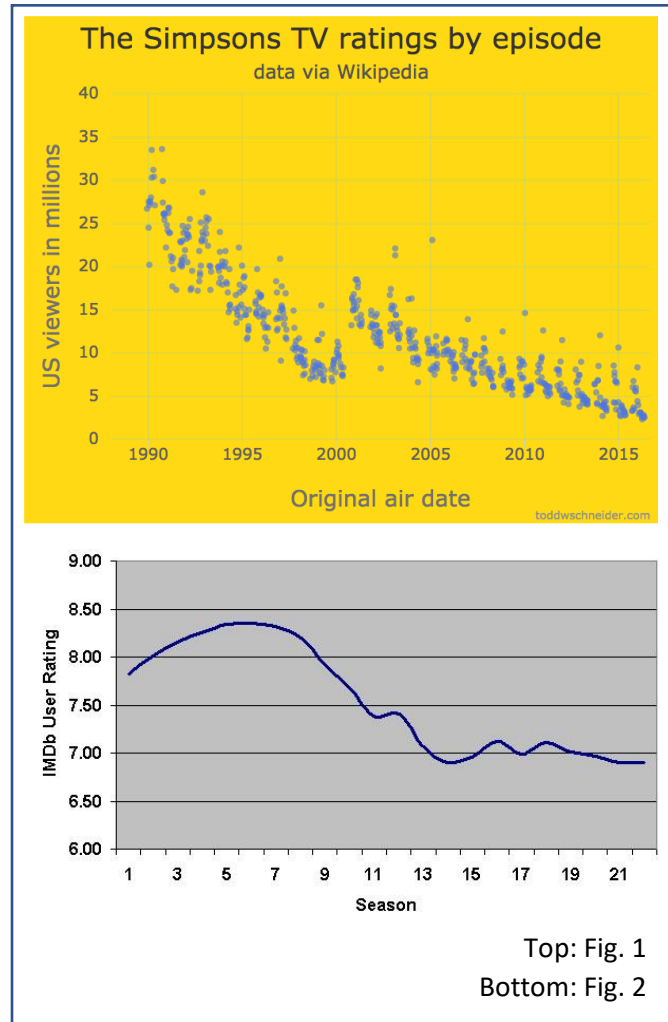
In his book *Digimodernism*, Kirby notes the moment of Postmodernism's end as being tied to the adaptation of the Postmodern ethos into children's films. It is important to note, though, that Kirby views the transition out of the Postmodern as slow and overlapping, with many of the texts, media, and art of this period as being transitional. The 1995 film *Toy Story* is emblematic of this cultural transition; the first major film to be entirely animated using computer generated graphics (harking toward a Digimodern future), and likewise the first major children's film to have a subtext fitting for adult viewing (a call to a Postmodern past/present, depending on where one views Postmodernism's end). Aside from *Toy Story*'s revolutionary animation technique, which

set a new standard for the following two decades, the film is undeniably Postmodern; it is ironic, pastiche laden, and feeds the nostalgic adult (Kirby 10). Furthermore, the film employs two narratives simultaneously, a children's narrative of magic, loss, and restoration, and an adult narrative of cultural shifts, where a traditionalist Woody is overtaken by a futurist Buzz Lightyear (Kirby 8-9). In this way, *Toy Story* not only marks its aging Postmodern adult viewers as falling behind the times, so to speak, but also comments on its own position as a new type of children's film. Kirby notes other children's films from near the same time, such as *Shrek* (2001) and *Chicken Run* (2000), that successfully manage to capture the Postmodern ethos, but what is most telling of the Postmodern decline is the formulization and failure of the films that would follow, such as *Shrek 2* (2004), or *Madagascar* (2005). Kirby writes,

If it had undermined postmodernism to be reduced to a child's plaything, it was even more humiliating to become that infant's discarded toy, grown out of and left behind. When postmodernism turned into yesterday's style in the eyes of the children, it surely entered the absolute past tense of contemporary culture. (15-16)

The same decline can be found in long running television series that aired during the same period, the most obvious, and perhaps the most quintessentially Postmodern example being *The Simpsons*. Nearly everything about *The Simpsons* is markedly Postmodern; the fictional family's structure of two parents and two-and-a-half children parodies the American nuclear family, further elucidated by Homer's employment at a nuclear power plant; the show's writing is an endless series of satirical pop culture references, winking at the informed and knowing viewer; even the very format of the

serialized sitcom nods toward a rejection of grand narratives – the show’s characters never age or learn, and rarely change (with a few exceptions, such as Lisa becoming a vegetarian in season 7, episode 5). When analyzing viewership numbers, it is clear that the show has been in decline since its initial airing [fig. 1] (Schneider). However, when compared with IMDB user ratings of each season, the show reaches its all-time peak in seasons 5 through 8 (1994-1997), before going on a steady decline and



reaching a low point in season 14 (2003) [Fig. 2]. From this data, it would be easy to say that, like *Toy Story*, *The Simpsons* was at its best during this late Postmodernist plateau, and that it declined alongside to join the *Shrek* 2s of the world, but this would miss the point. Consider the show *Community* (2010) by Dan Harmon. One could say that *Community* is the spiritual successor to a show like *The Simpsons*, at the very least in its continuous use of parody/pastiche. However, where the shows differ is in their respective tones. In place of *The Simpsons*’ jeering, ironic parody is *Community*’s celebrative, sincere, pastiche. In place of the word ‘sincere’, Kirby opts for ‘earnest’,

although along with this distinction he uses the words ‘unsexy’ and ‘exaggerated pseudograndeur’, polar to his description of ‘irony’ as being ‘knowing’, ‘cool’, and ‘hip’; his focus is perhaps too narrow (153). An excellent example is found in season 1, episode 23, of *Community*, titled *Modern Warfare*. This episode features a school-wide paintball competition, where the lone survivor wins a prize. The root of this episode appears parodic, replacing the essential violent act of firing a gun found in many action movies with the nonlethal paintball, but the episode’s plot is a complex string of pastiches from many notable action films, including *Battle Royale* (2000), *Die Hard* (1988), and *The Warriors* (1979), among others, each pastiche affectionately rendered. Contrary to the mocking satire found in *The Simpsons*, which typically requires source knowledge to understand the joke [Fig. 3], *Community*’s pastiches, due to their faithfulness to the original, can be appreciated on their own, although source knowledge makes the viewing experience doubly satisfying [Fig. 4]. Furthermore, Harmon frequently speaks through characters in *Community* to reveal his intentions; In season 2, episode 19, the character Abed responds to a claim about the show ‘spoofing’ films, to which he replies that he prefers the term ‘homage’, delineating pastiche from satire. Not only this, but at least twice in the show, characters have commented on the Post-postmodern condition, or made note that Postmodernism is outdated (*Community* – season 1, episode 25; season 6, episode 5). It is important to clarify that *Community* is not necessarily a beacon of Postmodernity’s decline, but rather serves as a transitional example, pinpointing a trajectory that is moving away from irony and toward the sincere.



Fig. 3

Top: *Pulp Fiction* (1994), directed by Quentin Tarantino

Bottom: *The Simpsons: 22 Short Films About Springfield*, episode 149 (1996), created by Matt Groening

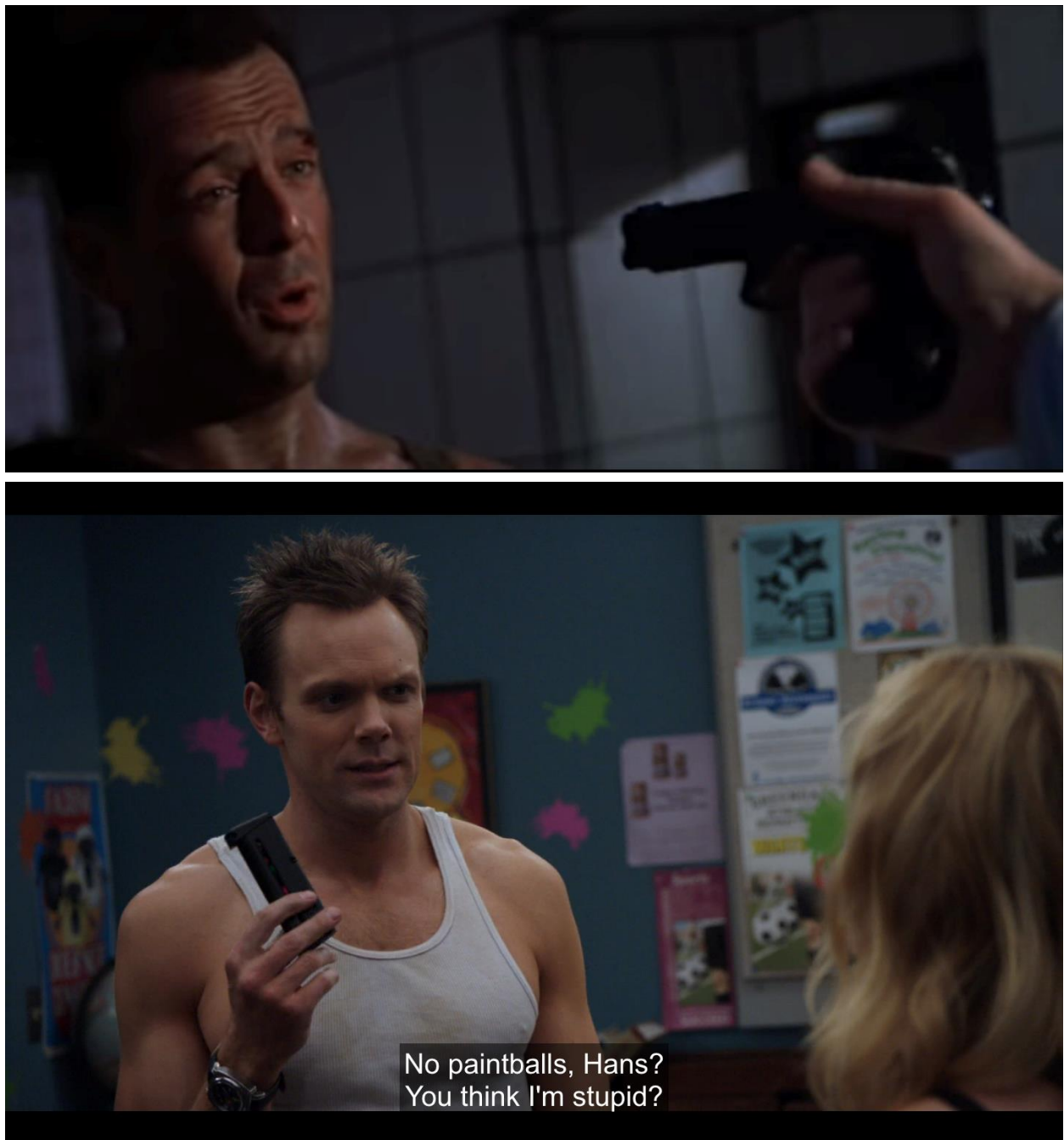


Fig. 4

Top: *Die Hard* (1988), directed by John McTiernan

Bottom: *Community: Modern Warfare* (2010), episode 23, created by Dan Harmon

For Vermeulen and van den Akker, the period that follows the Postmodern period, the Metamodern, is characterized by an oscillation between the Modern and the Postmodern (5). This is to say, if Modernism is defined by its idealism, and Postmodernism by its skepticism, then the Metamodern is “a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 5). Noting the link, and the difference, between Hegel’s ‘positive’ idealism and Kant’s ‘negative’ idealism, Vermeulen and van den Akker see the Metamodern as the ‘as-if’ era; this is the recognition that humanity is not actually moving toward a natural and unknown goal, but that progress comes from acting *as if* they are. Or, more poetically, participating in the search for truth knowing that truth might not exist, or at the very least, might not be visible (5). It is important to note that this oscillation between the Modern and the Postmodern is not a balance, but rather a negotiation, and a state of being in between. Citing Plato’s notion of ‘metaxy’ (translated as ‘between’), Vermeulen and van den Akker write that “the metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens*⁶ and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all” (6).

Raoul Eshelman’s notion of ‘Performatism’, then, becomes a central practice in the Metamodern. For Eshelman, the term Performatism “refers to a strong performance, which is to say a successful, convincing, or moving attempt by an opaque subject to transcend what [he] call[s] a double frame” (154). In this way, the viewer is forced to consider a singular solution to a proposed problem. This solution can be implausible, or

⁶ French for “meaning”

unbelievable to the viewer, but within the context of the frame, they are coerced into identifying with the subject, however not without maintaining scope of the total argument (Eshelman 157-9). Thus, an oscillation between skepticism and acceptance occurs, stemming from sincere intention on behalf of the artist; the viewer is able to grasp the closed meaning of the work within its context, but does not necessarily abandon their own beliefs.

Of course, when considering this oscillation between Modern idealism and Postmodern skepticism, one can not but help but return to the idea of earnestness or sincerity. In 2010, art critic Jerry Saltz wrote about the rise of sincerity in artworks made by young artists showing at the New Museum's *Younger Than Jesus* exhibition, a trend which he saw continue through the Whitney Biennial, and come to fruition at the 'Greater New York' exhibition at MoMA P.S. 1. Saltz writes,

At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind. (nymag.com)

The Metamodern also sees a return to Romanticism, or the emergence of a Neoromanticism, marked by an inclination "toward the tragic, the sublime, and the uncanny" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 8). Replacing the irony found in Damien Hirst's works, or parody found in works by artists like Cindy Sherman, rises a sensibility

that includes “tropes of mysticism, estrangement, and alienation to signify potential alternatives; and their conscious decision to attempt, in spite of those alternatives, untenableness” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 9). Likewise, to the Metamodern ethos at large, this Neoromantic attitude can be described as an oscillation between two poles, a synthesizing between the finite and the infinite, the real and the ethereal (Vermeulen and van den Akker 8).

What becomes most clear amongst these texts is a sense of urgency to move away from sentiments of cynicism, irony, and distance. To me, these are tactics of avoiding confrontation, accepting/normalizing behaviour as status quo, and removing oneself from responsibility or self-interrogation. Especially when making artwork that deals with subjects such as whiteness or masculinity – subjects that come from a position of power and privilege – it is too easy, and perhaps too disingenuous to approach as coolly distant and ironic. The intent remains unclear, and success becomes conditional on the viewer’s personal interpretation. Returning to a notion put forward earlier – that of Metamodernism’s oscillation between Modern idealism and Postmodern skepticism – I see masculinity, whiteness, with privileges included, as both not naturally occurring and not supernaturally directed (Modern idealism), nor are they entirely irredeemable (Postmodern skepticism). Instead, what remains is a critical hopefulness; an acknowledgment of necessary unpacking and leveling, but also a hope that through this act of critical self-reflection, an identity that isn’t often contingent on subjugating the other can begin to emerge.

--- Case Studies ---

In addition to drawing from theoretical texts on contemporary art, I have also conducted in depth visual research into contemporary artists who are working with content and themes similar to my own. Three artists in specific stand out as most relevant: Eric Fischl, Michael Borremans, and Christian Rex van Minnen.

Eric Fischl's work, especially his paintings from the 1980's, tends to deal with where he is from; In an interview with Artspace Magazine he identifies this as white, upper-middle class suburbia. These themes have begun to resurface in Fischl's most recent exhibitions, *Late America*⁷, and *Presence of an Absence*⁸, although here the works feel like they lean more toward the political than to the personal [Fig. 5]. In the same interview, Fischl notes that he does not necessarily think of these works as being apart of a political campaign, or a political statement, but more as a way to look at the world he is connected to and familiar with; a way to sort out the feelings he has with the current political tone of the United States, particularly during and after the Trump presidential campaign. Fischl states,

The Trump election cycle showed a stark contrast between the potential for an America of great diversity with a reordering of the power structure, versus a dying, last-ditch effort for an old power – a white,

⁷ Skarstedt Gallery, 550 West 21st Street, New York, NY; May 2 – June 24, 2017.

⁸ Skarstedt Gallery, 8 Bennet Street, London, UK; March 1 – May 26, 2018.

male power – to maintain control. The contrast was so stark that it was hard to ignore, and the election confirmed not that the future would be held by the old power structure, but that it actually is over, because they elected a completely incompetent, white, rich male. This represents the end of something. (qtd. in Abrams)



Fig. 5
Late America, Eric Fischl, 2016

In this way, Fischl imagines his works as being more documentary – documenting a moment in American decline. The subjects featured in these works appear to be isolated and disconnected. Fischl notes that what he finds most disturbing amongst the figures is their lack of affect in comparison to how he imagines they should be reacting, he says, “They are not in danger, they are not troubled, there’s nothing. They are just sitting there and standing there with the warmth of the light, the richness of the blue – yet there is incredible disconnect. It’s profoundly tragic (qtd. in Abrams) [Fig.6].” Content aside, Fischl manages to strike a careful balance between representational accuracy and fluid brushwork that oozes ease; parts of his works are delicately rendered, where



Fig. 6
Face Off, Eric Fischl, 2017

others nearly fall apart [Fig. 7]. Even compositionally, Fischl's works can sometimes feel collaged, with subtle halos surrounding figures, and contradictory light sources illuminating subjects in different ways. Despite these unusual choices, the paintings manage to evoke a feeling of considered harmony, as if each stroke deliberate.



Fig. 7
Feeding the Turtle, Eric Fischl, 2016

What initially drew me into Fischl's works was his bold use of bright colours, but what kept me looking was his unusual compositions and uneven attention to detail. I noted above the somewhat collaged aesthetic some of the figures have in his paintings, and this served as an affirmation that reference photographs do not necessarily have to be complete in composition to be valuable. Before really digging into Fischl's paintings, I

had become too attached to my reference photographs, eagerly trying to recreate in paint what was in front of me. I realized that, in fact, paintings became more interesting when there was a departure from the reference, and that by adding, removing, or combining portions of different reference materials I could work in a much more fluid and intuitive way. Likewise can be said toward his uneven attention to detail; it was a lesson in creating distance between the reference and painted work, and in learning when to stop. Merely copying a photograph does little to create an interesting painting, and allowing sections of a painting to be less resolved, or less explicit, creates some mystery and intrigue, as well as drawing attention toward the materiality of the paint.

If Fischl's work is shrouded within his own personal experience, Michael Borremans is working in a markedly different way. Similar to other contemporary Belgian artists, such as Luc Tuymans, Borremans' early paintings were generated from photographs taken in the 1930's and 40's, although he notes that this way of working was too recognizable; read as nostalgic (Coggins). Now, Borremans is working with models who pose in his studio, as well as made-to-order sculptures, often taking photographs to use as reference for later. These works often refer to art history; in his exhibition *Horse Hunting* at David Zwirner in 2006, Borremans specifies the intentional dialogue with Manet paintings like *The Dead Toreador* and *The Execution of Maximilian* (Coggins) [Fig. 8]. The references are often subtle, appealing to consciousness in an open way; he refers to the imagery of the 20th century and earlier as "baggage we have to deal with (qtd. in Coggins)." Borremans' paintings, rendered in a traditional style akin to baroque and rococo portraiture are simultaneously haunting and familiar. His works have an

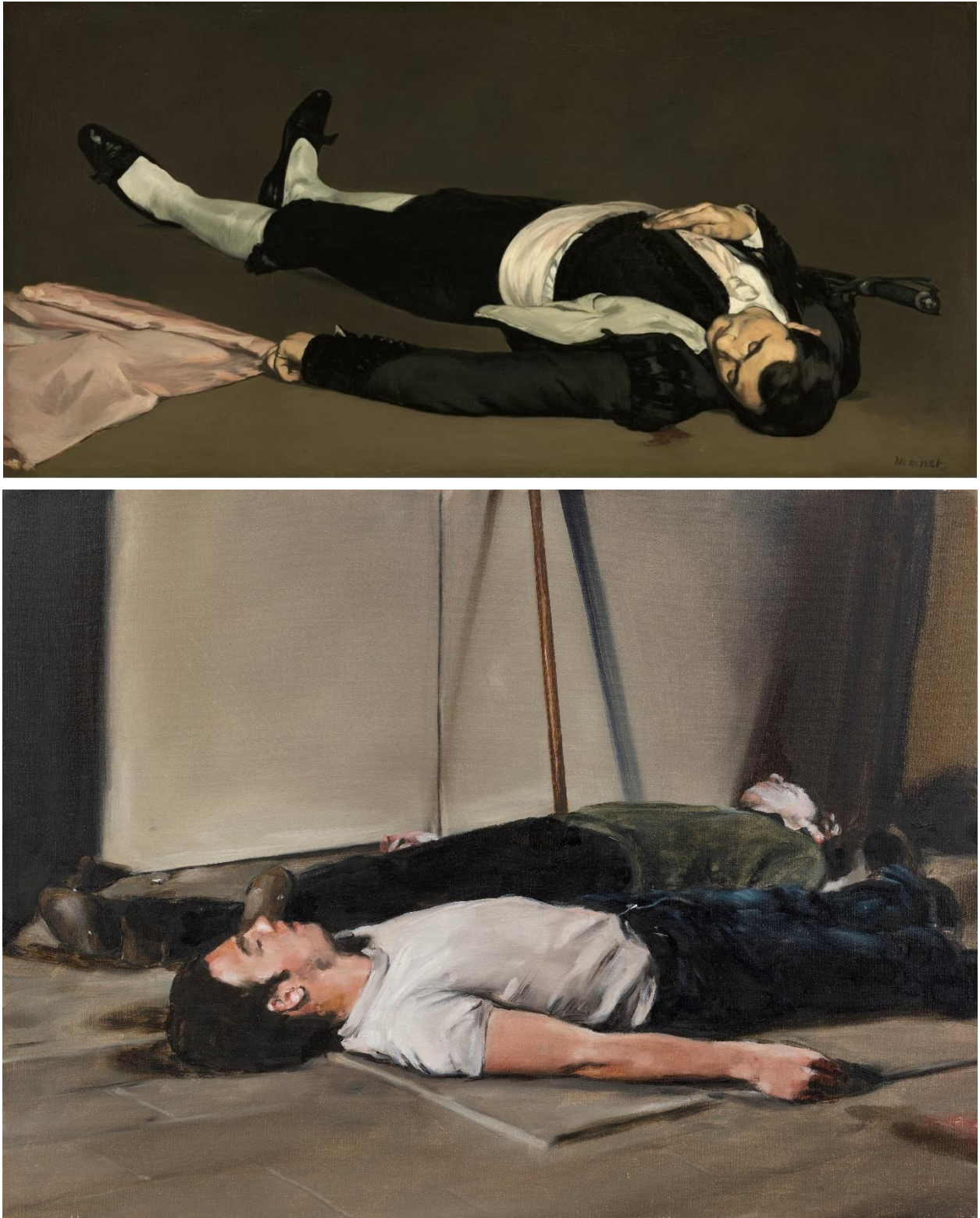


Fig. 8

Top: *The Dead Toreador*, Edouard Manet, ~1864

Bottom: *The Bodies*, Michael Borremans, 2005

unsettling quality that grows as you stay with the work, and are suggestive of the otherworldly, or have a vaguely supernatural appeal to them. Borremans' knowledge and application of art history is what I find most compelling about his work. Much like the sincere pastiche written about in the section prior, the viewer does not need to know Borremans' references to appreciate and enjoy the work, but being able to place the reference makes the work doubly satisfying.

Ultimately, though, Borremans' work is shrouded in mystery; he offers very little toward his intentions, and tends to gauge the success of a work based off of the viewers interpretation (Tylevich). Although his subjects aren't exclusively male, I find Borremans' depictions of masculinity as particularly magnetic. The male figures in his work are often vacant in expression, or oblivious to their surroundings. When there are multiple boys or men together, there is a palpable tension that resonates between them [Fig. 9]. There is an exotic deadness to his subjects, seemingly halted in a moment, and yet contrasted by a springing vivaciousness through the painterly application and materiality. Many of Borremans' works appear to be underscored by a violent act, either having just happened or on the verge of happening. His subjects do not seethe, or rage, but rather seem disconnected, affectless. There's something powerful amongst these choices, although difficult to locate.



Fig. 9
The Hare, Michael Borremans, 2005

The final, and perhaps most contemporary painter I will analyze is Christian Rex van Minnen. Van Minnen's paintings are sort of like the spiritual synthesis of Fischl and Borremans. Simultaneously personal and political, rooted deeply in the history of painting, but without ignoring the socio-political spheres that surround those references. Van Minnen draws influence from the Northern Renaissance masters, and the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th century. He views his works as a middle point between Modernism and the old masters; modernism being all about the material and the paint, whereas prior to that, painting lent itself to a didactic presentation of ideas (Pricco) [Fig. 10]. Van Minnen doesn't take these inspirations merely at face value though, and has



Fig. 10

Top: *Still Life with Fruit and Roemer*, Pieter Claesz, 1644

Bottom: *Nothing Wounded Goes Uphill*, Christian Rex van Minnen, 2017

expressed mixed feelings about the works that came from the era. He sees that historical period as being the root of a lot of the world's problems; the early celebration of capitalism and the global economy – the art market explosion, the explosion of the merchant class – slavery, the global marketplace, colonization. Although born in America, van Minnen's father is South African, and as a half-Afrikaner, he is constantly wrestling with that conversation. He writes,

What do you do with this history as a white man coming from a colonized state? All this baggage comes with that, and what do you do with it? How do we reformulate our identity as being white? All that stuff has really built up, and it seems like it has come to a head now. (qtd. in Pricco)

In essence, van Minnen is making works to try and understand himself, hoping that it resonates with other people. He continues,

[I'm] trying to truthfully and honestly reveal my own process, thinking about my identity as a heterosexual white American male. It sort of reflects where I'm at personally. I have a lot of undesirable traits that I feel like I'm trying to move forward and grow from. I feel like I'm in this in-between state, doing a lot of this spiritual work, this psychological work, and I'm not there yet. I'm just sort of in this liminal state. I think a lot of people are seeking help in that way. Wanting to move on, but it's painful. (qtd. in Pricco)

Van Minnen's works are both alluringly attractive and repulsively grotesque [Fig. 11]. The result can be destabilizing, but it is within this destabilization where he finds opportunity for growth. He notes that he is not trying to be provocative simply for provocation's sake and is cautious of being too ironic or flippant. In an interview with Juxtapoz Magazine, van Minnen talks about watching the UFC⁹ reality television show in his studio. He sees the show as being about the fragility of masculinity, and the male ego. He listens to the guys living in the house and hears them as little boys, struggling with ideas of prescribed masculinity. He identifies with this type of person, he states, "those are the people that I grew up around. It's an odd, underdeveloped sense of masculinity (qtd. in Pricco)." He goes on to say that watching the show is not really an enjoyment, but more of a heartache, or a gross feeling, but also an amped up feeling.

I am, of course, drawn to the hyper-surrealism of van Minnen's works; they are enchanting, even if only in the sense of mastery of medium. And I think this is the critical essence of van Minnen's works. Likewise to paintings created during the Dutch Golden Age, they are masterfully rendered, but when we look at paintings from that era, we often forget about the social and political travesties that occurred during the same time. We just get drawn into the beauty of the medium and forget about the rest. Van Minnen positions his work in the same way, with a dutiful attention to mastery and skill, but then pushes the viewer back with these repulsive images. In this way, he reminds the viewer

⁹ Ultimate Fighting Championship.

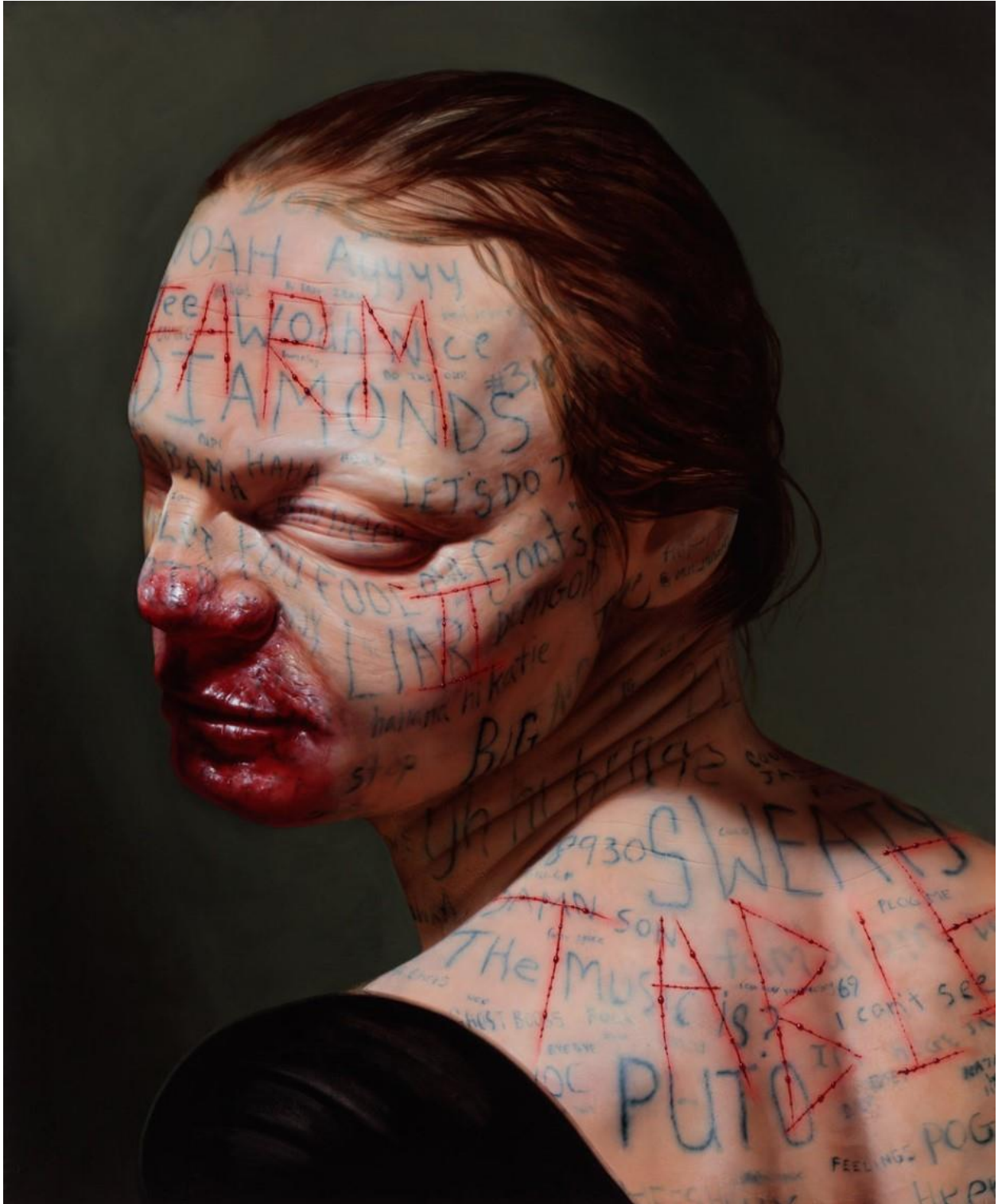


Fig. 11
Farm to Table
Christian Rex van Minnen
2017

of the nefarious history that props up this lineage of painting, disrupting this rose-tinted idealism that art history tends to project.

A similar sentiment can be expressed for his perspective on masculinity. There is a long history of power and subjugation swirling around it that often gets swept under the rug. There is that long standing 'boys-will-be-boys' mentality that accepts these behaviours as normal, ingrained. Van Minnen pushes some of these ideas to an over-the-top extreme where you can not help but be repulsed, especially in his use of text as it scrawls across the bodies of the male subjects in his works, either as tattoos or as cuts in their flesh. Text such as, 'IMAGINE FUCKING YOU' or 'USA tight pussy' are immediately interpretable as sexually violent, and again, while these are clearly extremes employed to repulse, they echo reality relatively closely [Fig. 12]. There is a dialogue that happens between the familiar candor of these text fragments and the grotesque bodies on which they appear that immediately repulses the viewer, and yet, again, the mastery over material and complexity of subject continues to draw us in. Truthfully, I think van Minnen's works can sometimes be a little heavy handed; his message is clear, in that this particular brand of masculinity is reprehensible, but when faced with this kind of over-the-top depiction, it is easy to create distance between yourself, as a viewer, and the subjects in the work. It becomes a little too easy to say, "Oh, well that's not me." I must admit, however, that I find the way he talks about his work, or where he finds inspiration from, to be quite compelling, especially when he is describing the type of masculinity often found in reality television. The same problem still arises though: as viewers we create distance between ourselves and the

spectacular (over)reactions we see in these types of shows. The show's participants become caricatures of what they represent, be it masculinity, rage, jealousy, and so on. What becomes lost is a certain subtlety that keeps the work open enough to be relatable, and if I had to pinpoint a weakness in van Minnen's work, this would be it. This is something I have been considering in my own works, trying to strike the balance between the fantastic and the real, trying to pull back from imagery that becomes too explicit, or too over-the-top; keeping the work subtle, open, and relatable.



Fig. 12

Left: *Caput Mortuum: Imagine Fucking You*, Christian Rex van Minnen, 2017

Right: *Caput Mortuum: USA Tight Pussy*, Christian Rex van Minnen, 2017

--- Analysis of My Artworks ---

Before discussing individual paintings, it is useful to outline some general tendencies in my approach. My paintings begin with a photograph, either taken from a personal archive of photos I have taken and collected throughout my life, or staged photographs generated in the studio and in photoshoots done on location. In both cases, I am working digitally to make rough compositions, sometimes collaging materials together. This process isn't an exact formula, and the reference material generated can be at various stages of completeness. After I have gathered and worked through the reference materials, I make a rough sketch on the stretched canvas, over a brightly coloured ground or imprimatura¹⁰. The next layer of paint happens quickly; using lots of solvent to keep the paints flowing and loose, I work mostly alla prima¹¹, focusing mostly on colour and value, without paying too much attention to detail. After this layer is dry and firm, I begin to work more slowly, adding in finer details, pulling up highlights and deepening shadows. In this layer of paint, or series of layers, I'm frequently stepping back from the canvas, making sure I don't lose too much of the earlier layers' energy and movement.

In a general sense, these works act as a peering into my own identity as a white, male, Canadian, but also as a response to some of the actions and behaviours I saw in boys

¹⁰ A transparent layer of colour paint over a white ground, so that light can reflect through the layer of paint.

¹¹ Italian for "first attempt": working wet-on-wet, where the paint isn't allowed to dry.

and men I knew growing up during the late 1990's and 2000's in southern Ontario. As bell hooks writes, "[...] there can be no intervention that challenges the status quo if we are not willing to interrogate the way our presentation of self as well as our pedagogical process is often shaped by middle-class norms" (185). This critical reflection is not meant to simply disparage though, and should be viewed as a calling-in, rather than a calling-out. One of the central ideas in Jane Bennet's *Vibrant Matter* is to shift focus to "a politics less devoted to blaming and condemning individuals than to discerning the web of forces affecting situations and events" (Cover copy), and this is a strategy I have tried to uphold in my own work. These works present some of the complicated modes of masculine construction, such as violence, embarrassment, and a masking of affect, among others. Although there is some crossover in subject from the works of Fischl, Borremans, and van Minnen, my works tend to take a much more personal and anecdotal approach, maintaining a constant dialogue with memory and experience. As my work progressed, the concept of disruption became essential, whether it be in the form of physical depictions in the composition, or the materiality of the paint itself. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennet draws from French author and philosopher Jacques Ranciere, noting that the political act is inherently disruptive, as it stands against preserving political order (Bennet 105). Furthermore, as disruption pertains to the materiality of paint, I see it acting as mediator between the long-established history of painting, along with its intertwined politics. Especially while employing long-standing oil painting techniques alongside disruptive mark-making, an opportunity for leveling occurs, and perhaps begins to work to dismantle a hierarchy.

In this first work, *Intimate Rut* [Fig. 13], the disruptive nature of the painted surface begins to emerge. Although the figures are recognizably rendered, the visible brushwork begins to breakdown upon closer inspection; some marks made with a rag, more a remnant of erasure than purposeful application. The modified oil paint drips through it self, running through other colours and becoming intermingled. Bold red lines from the initial sketch are continually reinforced, being pulled through into the final composition. Despite the forcefulness of mark making apparent in this work, there is a delicate layering that occurs, with hints of an abandoned underpainting only momentarily

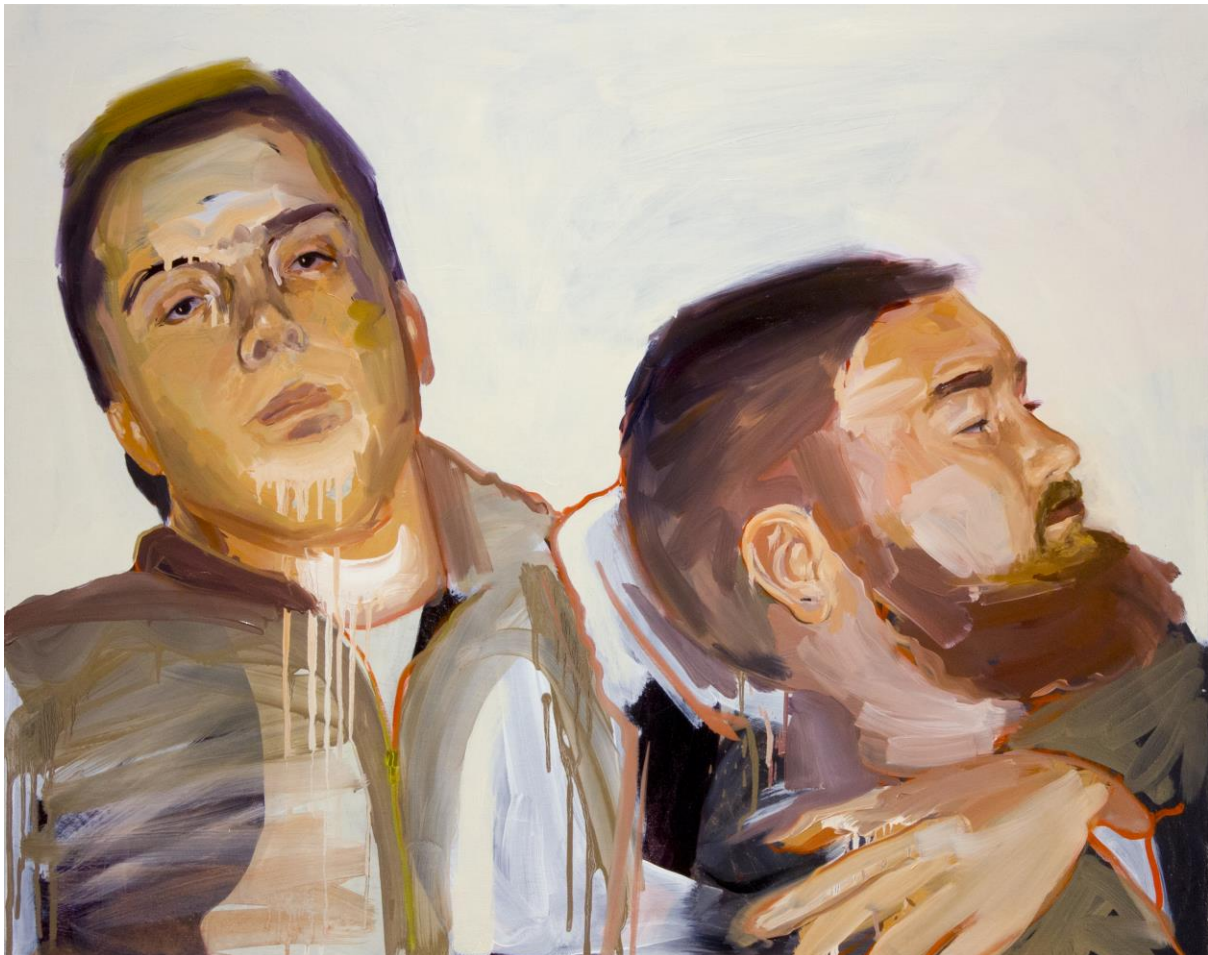


Fig. 13
Intimate Rut, Miles Ingrassia, 2019

revealed through layers of paint with varied transparency. The two figures in this work stand ostensibly embraced in a pose that straddles between drunken half-hug and headlock. Eyes glazed over, one staring directly into the viewer, the other out of frame, these men appear affectless, almost unaware of their intimacy.

A similar form of disruption can be seen in this next work, *Make Your Old Man Proud* [Fig. 14]. Here, I worked from a photograph taken in my studio where I projected a hyper-masculine body over my own, creating an image with deep shadows and high contrast. I worked to resolve a relatively realist portrait but was unsatisfied with the somewhat didactic presentation. This work was created later in the body of works, and I had been trying to be more intuitive with my process, taking on more risk. The painting had become stiff and overworked, and I wanted to bring in some more painterly application. I worked quickly over the set painting, loading the surface with wet paint. Following an impulse, I took a rag and began to smear across the surface. The wet paints intermingled and merged with each other, sometimes lifting off the canvas and becoming more transparent. The result is a beautiful swirling aura that disrupts the image plane and seems to incapsulate the figure. Similar to the prior image, I had been trying to pull forward some of the red lines from the initial sketch into each subsequent layer, and there are hints of this red being pulled into and swirled with this aura-like stroke. The beauty of this painting lies in variation of mark making; a deep and nearly flat semi-transparent grey that floods along the top, slowly transitioning into a more saturated swirling before eventually falling off into a heavily applied and brightly solid application along the forearms and tops of the hands. These contrasting areas of

saturation make it seem as if the figure was once illuminated but has been disrupted by this hazy cloud.



Fig. 14
Make Your Old Man Proud, Miles Ingrassia, 2019



Fig. 15
Descent, Miles Ingrassia, 2019

Descent [Fig. 15] features two boys or men sitting on a set of stairs, their faces obscured by the posts of the railing, facing away. They sit apart from each other, a few steps removed, blocking easy passage up or down. The setting is familiar and subtly subversive, echoing the raw and utilitarian aesthetic of many basement stairwells. It is this 'out-of-sight' sentiment of heading downstairs that has this vaguely illicit, mysterious quality. There is a palpable tension among the two figures, and their relationship is unclear. Are they friends? Enemies? Do they even know each other, or are they merely

in the same place? It is these unknowns that make this painting interesting; Especially from the perspective of the viewer, ascending up the stairs, peering through the posts at these two figures sitting above, their unpredictability intact.



Fig. 16
Disposable Frills, Miles Ingrassia, 2018

Disposable Frills [Fig. 16] was created working from a photograph I took in my studio. I was wearing new shoes while gessoing canvas and did not want them to get ruined. The image reminded me of being a kid heading to a party and getting caught in the rain.

We would run into the corner store and get bags to put over our feet. It is a weird management of embarrassment, front-loading to avoid it later. It is a simultaneous caring and not caring. I think it also speaks to a specific economic situation, and the preciousness or revered status a pair of Nikes can attain. Something to be protected, doted over, tended to. I remember once watching these guys smoke weed and detail shoes for an hour, maybe too afraid to let anyone know it's their only pair. A socially accepted status symbols, something that shows off taste and money without being too tasteful, or too wealthy. A symbol that keeps it real.

The reference for *Veneer* [Fig. 17] comes from a photo I took in my early 20's. The subject is a friend of mine who had recently moved in to share my one-bedroom apartment. We had been, and still are, long time friends, knowing each other at least as acquaintances since middle school. Prior to moving in, however, we had not talked to each other in a year. We were both incredibly stubborn and had had a falling out over a bad batch of MDMA¹², the associated money, and his now ex-girlfriend. Before I moved to Toronto, we had the type of relationship where we would see each other a few times a week, and likewise he visited me in my first Toronto apartment frequently enough to start dating my neighbour. Needless to say, our closeness was matched only by our subsequent silence and seething sense of betrayal. We made up as quickly as we fell out, never acknowledging what had happened, or making amends, and suddenly we were living on top of one another. There is an uneasy tension that comes with being so

¹² Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, commonly known as Ecstasy.

emotionally illiterate; so much baggage to carry, and an uncertainty toward when it will all come out.



Fig. 17
Veneer, Miles Ingrassia, 2018

What I intended to capture in this painting is the negotiation between interior feelings and an inability to express outward. The face being obscured adds a feeling of mystery, shyness, or maybe embarrassment. At the same time, it is a playful image, which helps to maintain a feeling of distance, or an 'I don't care' attitude. The canvas had an opaque ground applied to it, then a wide grid in coloured conte, and a sketch done in pencil. The conte grid was easy to remove, so it did not interfere with the painting process, but it was a little less reliable for measuring while doing the initial sketch. This was the first painting where I tried to work in a really direct way. Most of the painting was done alla prima, except for filling out the background and adding in some defining shadows and highlights. I tried to maintain definitive strokes and to resist the urge to overly correct.

The inspiration for *After Hours* [Fig. 18] came from a photograph I took on the public transit. There was a guy sleeping on the subway, face covered, with his hands down his pants. I started this painting by working directly from this photograph, but after reflecting on issues of voyeurism, I decided to restage the scene in my studio, photographing myself, my face, in place of his. With the subject's hood up, only his mouth visible, and hands nested in his pants, there is something vaguely sexual and vaguely threatening about this image. The work speaks to how men can take up space in public without having to care about how their presence is being received. There is also an interesting interplay between comfort and discomfort; between being visible and shrouded.



Fig. 18
After Hours
Miles Ingrassia
2019



Fig. 19
Hot Knives
 Miles Ingrassia
 2018

In the painting *Hot Knives* [Fig. 19] I explore how substances can be used to mediate masculine relationships, and then how the repetition of that act starts to become ritualized. I wanted to work with ‘hot knives’ because of the relatively obscurity as a process for smoking hash, but also because of the low status of the act; it’s anti-glamorous in essence. The necessary objects become familiar: two butter knives, immediately tarnished and recognizable; a roughly hewn apparatus from which to smoke – an empty toilet paper tube, broken beer bottle, or cut off pop bottle, to name a few; and, of course, the site specificity of the coil stove itself. There’s a rhythm involved, a set of repeatable actions, a learning curve. It fills in the gaps of time and eases the tension of interaction.

In *Crumbling Façade* [Fig. 20], I am trying to move away from using images of myself as reference material. I scheduled a photoshoot with a friend of mine, and although I had a number of poses in mind, when I got to his apartment, and started taking preliminary photographs, I became more interested in these candid shots that emerged. I tried to not necessarily lead a conversation, but to keep it moving, and to be ready for the right shots. I think there is a great deal of performance that happens when men interact with each other; it can be very guarded, very flippant. For this image, at that moment in our conversation, he was recounting a story about his uncle's struggle with addiction and distancing behaviour in general. Most of the conversation is intermingled with laughter, and almost has a prideful tone, but you can sense there is some pain or trauma that lies just below the surface. I think this is a coping mechanism that a lot of men use to deal with or discuss difficult topics. This image is trying to capture the breakdown of that façade. In between sarcastic laughter, and drags from his cigarette, there is a moment of silence where we both let the weight of the story fall on top of us. He lifts his glasses and rubs his eyes; the action is ruminant and contemplative, no longer masked by sarcasm or humor. Moments like this are brief but can be powerful. This breakdown of a steely exterior reminds me of my step-dads battle with cancer. He was an auto-body worker, a lifelong hockey player, and a heavy drinker. He was kind, and thoughtful, but also incredibly private and emotionally reserved. He was the type of person who had trouble expressing pride, or joy, but digging through his garage you would find



Fig. 20
Crumbling Façade
Miles Ingrassia
2018

numerous photographs of his children, their childhood toys, paintings, etc.; at his core he was a diehard sentimentalist, but only internally. The thing about cancer is that it not only erodes your body but your humanity as well, and strips you down to your very core. Even through this, though, he bottled it up inside; his fears, his joys, his love, all kept buried until moments before his death. And even in that revealing moment, all he could muster were two words, "I'm sorry," repeated a handful of times before losing strength for that day and falling back asleep. The treatment had eroded his mind, so I am sure it is about as much as he could manage, but it is telling that at the end of a life of keeping people out, that is all that there is left to escape. A brief unguarded moment in a sea of fear and loss.

--- Conclusion ---

Included in this paper is the culmination of research into critical theory regarding gender and identity, as well as research into ideas and trends emerging in contemporary art theory, analysis through case studies of successful contemporary artists, and the tangible results of a studio-based arts practice. The aim of my research is to inform and consolidate a world view and perspective, reinforced by personal anecdotes, which help to shape and steer the artwork that I make. Being careful to not have the work become too sterile, or too derivative, I find it important to not have the research be too much of a 1:1 relationship, but more of a foundation on which works are built. Outlined in this paper is the transition from the Postmodern to a new emerging era; be it the Meta-, Digi-, Alter-, or some other Post-Postmodern moniker, defined by a shift in inclination away from irony, distance, and cynicism, and toward an ethos of sincerity. Within this framework of sincerity, I peer into my own shared identity of white, male, Canadian, locating fragility, isolation, and blunted affect as cornerstones of contemporary masculinity, as well as an inability to manage these emotions and states. By analyzing the works of successful contemporary artists working with similar subjects, I am able to pinpoint my own interests, glean from their successes, and making a departure toward a more personal and anecdotal approach in my own practice. It is this sincere attempt at self-awareness that becomes the critical essence of my works, acting as a disruption toward acceptance of the status quo. I find it difficult to come to any concrete conclusions regarding the subject of masculinity; I'm not sure I have solutions or answers, nor am I certain that my voice is valuable to the topic. What ever the case,

though, it is imperative that men – especially white men - interrogate their own masculinity, whiteness, and come to understand the associated privileges and pitfalls. In essence, this research and fine arts practice is a way understand myself, and the people I grew up around, and hope that it speaks to others as well. There's a common notion in scientific study called the Hawthorne effect (also known as the Observer effect), where the act of observation changes the behaviour of the study's participants (Baclawski 88). By naming, and identifying these behaviours in my works, others can likewise begin to name and identify and these behaviours in themselves, and through this observation of self, create room for change.

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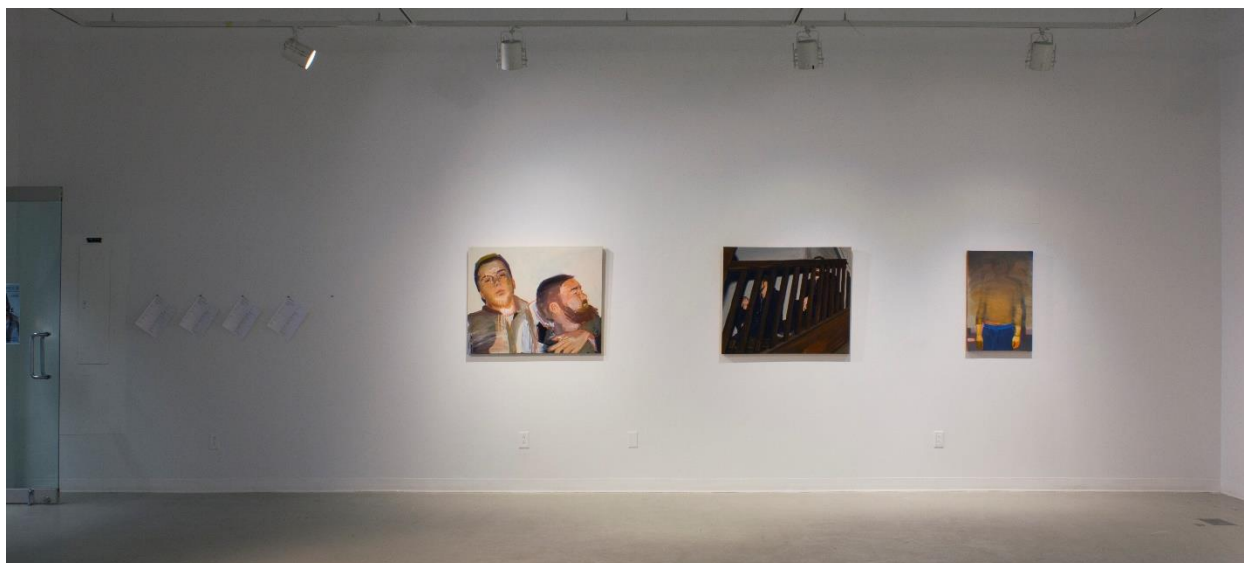
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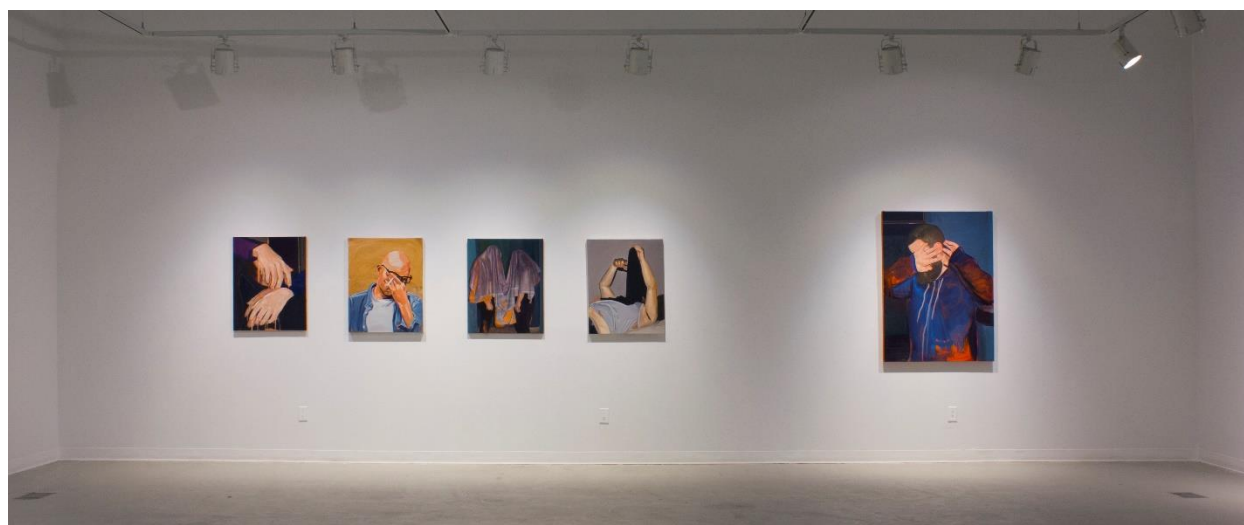
--- Appendix: *Intimate Rut* Documentation ---



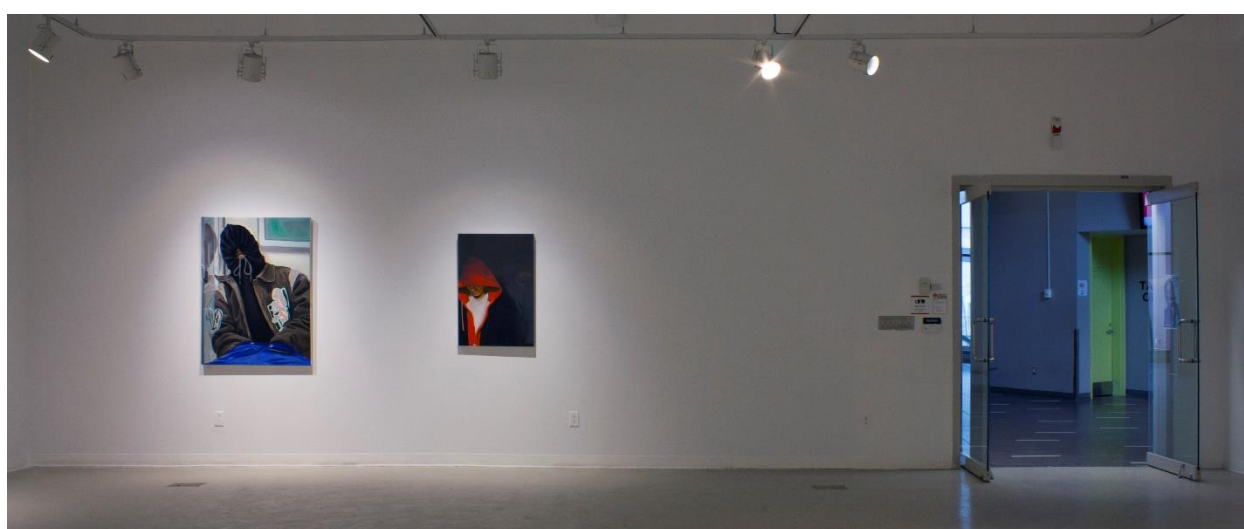
Intimate Rut: Wall A – installation photograph, Gales Gallery, April 2019



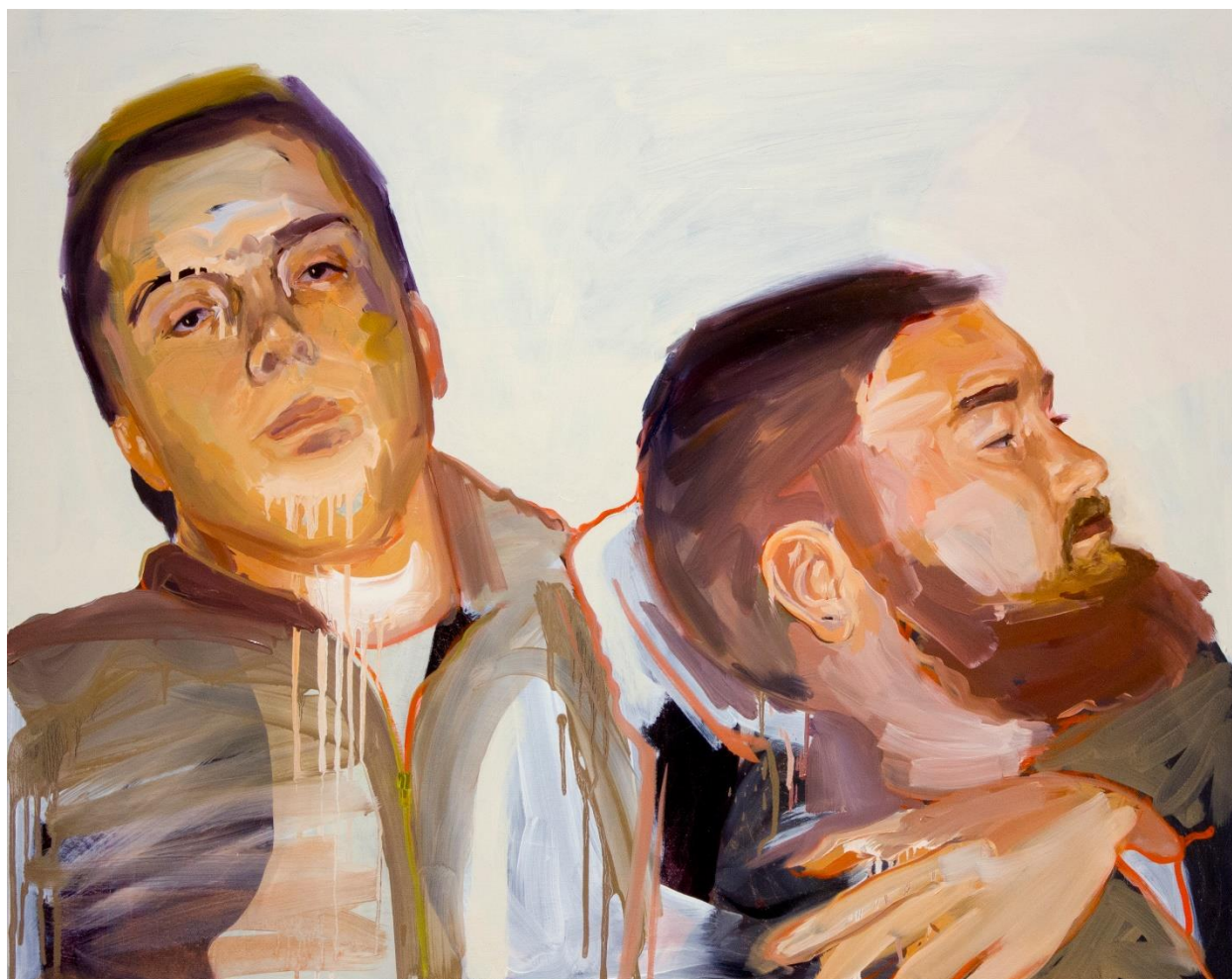
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Intimate Rut: Wall C – installation photograph, Gales Gallery, April 2019



Intimate Rut: Wall D – installation photograph, Gales Gallery, April 2019



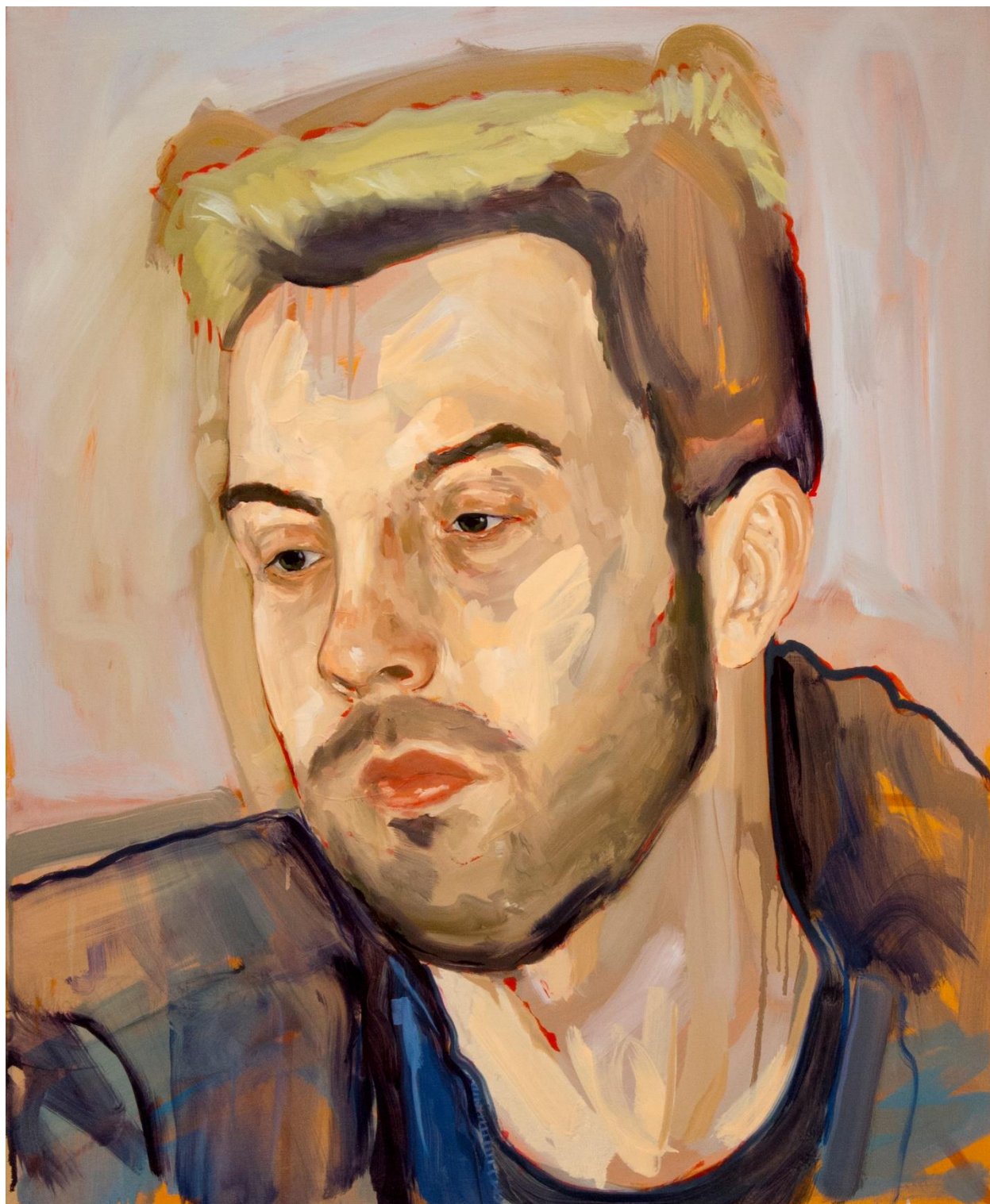
Intimate Rut
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2019



Descent
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2019



Make Your Old Man Proud
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2019

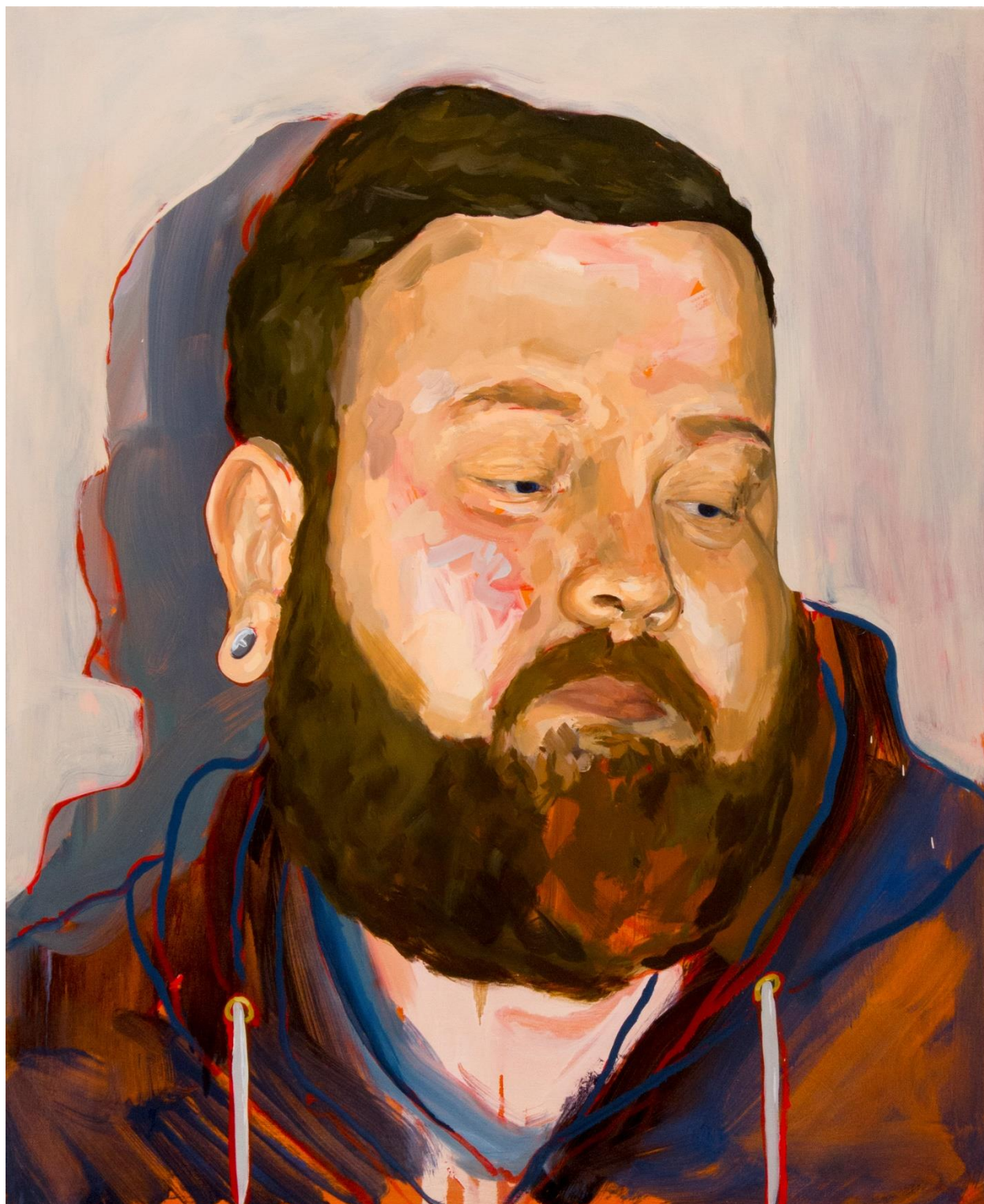


Distance 1 (Lennard)

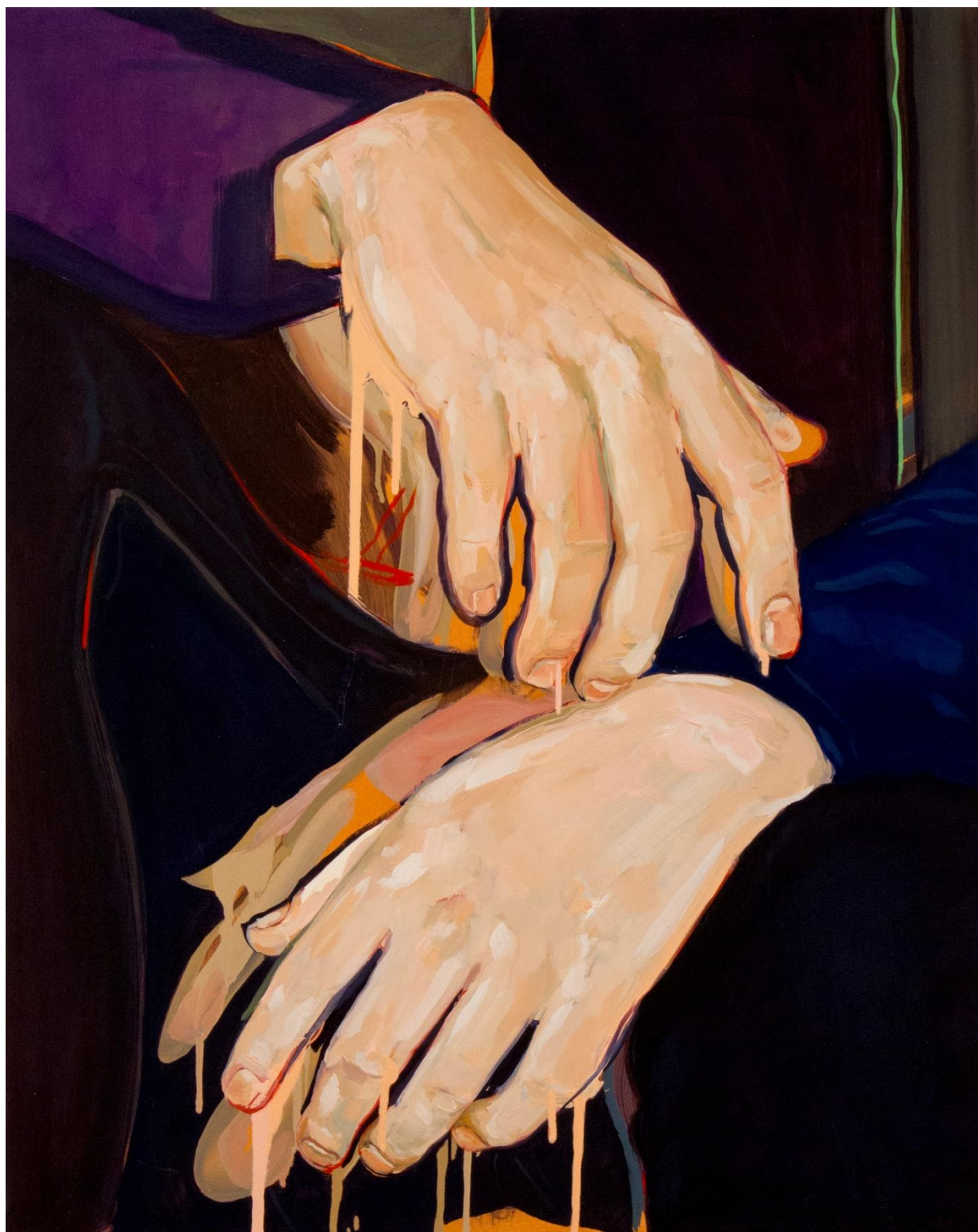
Miles Ingrassia

Oil on canvas

2019



Distance 2 (Alex)
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2019



fomo
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2019



Crumbling Façade
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2018



Inner Circle (Brick Wall)
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2019



Veneer
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2018



Bruiseless Children
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2019



After Hours
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on canvas
2019



Outside the Joy
Miles Ingrassia
Oil on panel
2019